

UC Merced

Frontiers of Biogeography

Title

Smash the windows

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6566m5s1>

Journal

Frontiers of Biogeography, 12(2)

Authors

Eichhorn, Markus P.

Baker, Kate

Griffiths, Mark

Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.21425/F5FBG47531

License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/> 4.0



Smash the windows

In our Opinion piece (Eichhorn et al. 2020), we argue that contemporary practices in biogeography are connected to legacies of European colonialism. We lay out several recommendations for how biogeographers can begin to decolonise the discipline, including improving access to data, recognising collaborative relationships, and by critically reflecting upon how our assumptions and perspectives might perpetuate colonial attitudes. As our positionality statements make clear, we come to this issue aware of our individual and collective positions within (post)colonial power relations. We believe that the obligation to say something outweighs the risk of making mistakes in the process. In Roll & Meiri (2020)'s letter, they make three criticisms of our text that we briefly respond to here.

The first criticism is for not openly providing data that was generated for the global map of author locations (Figure 1 in Eichhorn et al. 2020). In response, we described the methodology such that it is replicable by others using data and software tools which are freely available. However, for the convenience of readers, we gladly provide the underlying data and code used via an open-access repository¹.

The second contention made by Roll & Meiri is that we should not have used the Mercator projection in Figure 1 from Eichhorn et al. (2020). We agree that the projection has problematic associations. Nevertheless, even within biogeographical circles there is no agreed consensus as to the most appropriate map to use in global studies, as demonstrated by Roll & Meiri. Any active choice of map projection is itself a political decision. In this case, we do not think that use of the Mercator map in our commentary article undermines the central message.

Finally, Roll & Meiri discuss the manner in which we describe the relation between historical colonisers and their former territories, and our use of 'Global North' and 'the Tropics'. We agree that when communicating on this topic, great care is needed. We take this opportunity to clarify why we chose this language: there are former colonial powers, colonial settler states (such as Australia), and colonised territories. Former colonial powers overwhelmingly occur in temperate northern latitudes, the 'Global North', and are developed nations, whilst almost all tropical countries are developing and were at some point colonies of a European nation. There are numerous adjustments to be made for specific circumstances; for example, aboriginal Australians should be viewed as the victims of colonialism even while their settler compatriots are its beneficiaries. There is no established language to describe the issues around decolonising biogeography

- we have to start somewhere. The debate on terms is important, unresolved but also stifling. We require a term that refers to the (mostly) previously colonised, (generally) poorer and hotter parts of the world. At the moment, the shorthand preferred by many is 'Global South'. It is an overstretch – and one we firmly reject – to draw parallels with a civilised-uncivilised binary.

Decolonisation will not occur through academic publications alone given the overwhelming racial inequalities and colonial legacies they contain (Chakravartty et al. 2018). We are grateful that Roll & Meiri read our work, but the points they make concentrate on the form of our presentation – maps and language – without engaging with the ideas we present. Their points are valid but only scratch the surface of the radical change required to truly decolonise biogeography.

Markus P. Eichhorn^{1,2,*}, Kate Baker³ and Mark Griffiths⁴

¹ School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland. markus.eichhorn@ucc.ie, <https://treesinspace.com/>; ² Environmental Research Institute, University College Cork, Cork, Ireland.; ³ Centre for Water Systems, University of Exeter, Exeter, UK.; ⁴ School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK.

References

- Chakravartty, P., Kuo, R., Grubbs, V., & McIlwain, C. (2018). #CommunicationSoWhite. *Journal of Communication*, 68, 254–266.
- Eichhorn, M.P., Baker, K. & Griffiths, M. (2020). Steps towards decolonising biogeography. *Frontiers of Biogeography*, 12, e44795.
- Roll, R., & Meiri, S. (2020). Glass houses? – A comment on 'decolonising biogeography'. *Frontiers of Biogeography*, 12, e46908.

Submitted: 30 March 2020

First decision: 30 March 2020

Accepted: 2 April 2020

Edited by Robert J. Whittaker

¹ <https://osf.io/pumv8/>